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ABSTRACT

Techniques for teaching students to use a variety of language and communication skills to improve participation and success in cross-cultural situations are outlined. The approach evolved in the context of the Naval Postgraduate School at Monterey, California, in which foreign military officers must learn strategies for effective communication in a language that is not native to them. Students, enrolled in masters programs in technical subjects, are told they must "hit the ground running." Instruction begins with eight practical principles: practice; networking; using positive language; engaging listeners; knowing and using some language learning strategies; using one's unique characteristics to advantage; knowing one's strengths and abilities; and using humor. Activities open with talking about and exercising student perception of context and response in communication situations. Exercises include investigation of sensory dominance (visual, kinesthetic, or auditory), drawing and describing, exploration of cultural traits, and discussion of cultural values in problem-solving situations. A subsequent activity in which small groups set up an organization or business with an acronym for a name promotes cooperation and interaction. At the end of the quarter, each student makes an oral presentation on communication or a military topic. In preparation, students discuss their fears of speaking publicly in English, and possible solutions, and talk briefly about themselves in response to a teacher prompt. Contains 4 references. (MSE)

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SUCCESSFUL AND PRACTICAL INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES

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Abstract

This paper will describe the author's approach in teaching students to use a variety of language and communication skills to improve participation and success in cross-cultural situations, including networking techniques, how to attract useful language, and how to impact a situation while still learning the language. It will provide the audience with practical suggestions through the use of humor and examples. Appropriate for language teachers as well as for business professionals who travel to other countries or have colleagues from other cultures.

Successful and Practical Intercultural Communication Techniques

A professor from China came to me and said he wanted his physics classes to be interesting and exciting and needed some suggestions on how to improve his English so he could make that happen. He was very soft-spoken and shy and said that his students were mostly American military officers. I told him, "You are the interesting and exciting element; you are what's different in that class. Engage your students with you, and your English will also improve." He was surprised by my answer at first, but I was able to convince him that he possessed all he needed to meet his goals; I also suggested some strategies he could use on himself and in the classroom to ease his discomfort. In my talk today, I would like to accomplish two goals: to explain my approach teaching people straddling two cultures to be effective communicators from Day One and also to provide a few sample activities.

My job is to design and implement a communication skills program at the Naval Postgraduate School. My students are foreign military officers studying for a masters degree in subjects of particular use to militaries, ranging from weapons engineering to

operations analysis to management. While they arrive almost certainly with a sufficient score on a proficiency test, their challenge, unmeasured by that proficiency test, is to be able to participate and succeed in the new environment at a level appropriate to their status at home. The challenge is tremendous because, like businessmen, they arrive with a specific task to complete without the luxury of first becoming even somewhat comfortable. And in order to complete their task, these international officers must integrate rather suddenly into basically two new communities: their new town, and the combined military/academic institution where no one is a student as much as an officer, and everyone has also come into the larger community from somewhere else. In addition, they compete with American officers for top grades, and must write an acceptable thesis in a language not their own, (sometimes not even resembling their own). Luckily, being leaders in their own right, they are used to accepting challenges and rising to the occasion. Yet, no matter your level of self esteem and ability in your own culture, it is difficult to predict exactly how you will react in a new culture, and you may not have much time to examine the process.

Therefore, I tell my audience of male officers, "This is a combat experience: there is no time to stand on the battlefield and

consult the 'How to' field manual--you must hit the ground running, trust your training and instincts and use everything you've got." If I told them they were entering into a cross-cultural experience with an opportunity to grow and change, they would say, as some already do, "I no time learn Englishy." Instead, I shock them first by saying there is no time to learn English, only strategies, and promise them survival techniques. Of course it is not just a matter of learning the grammar structures, the slang, the military language, or when to shake hands, remain seated, initiate conversation. It is more a matter of how to perceive and then master the concepts behind the new language and behavior, and to interpret and imitate the multiple layers of social behavior which unconsciously drive native speakers. In fact, the issues that the officers face are similar to those that anyone faces who needs to function effectively in another culture, namely: a sense of loss of power and loss of what you are good at, and a lack of finesse. Lack of finesse is an important one according to my students, because it means having to use the words you know, not necessarily just the right words to express yourself, and of never knowing if your behavior is absolutely correct in a myriad of social situations.

Perhaps closely related to this is the issue of what do you do when you do get beyond the surface level of the language and

culture? There is an increase in involvement, and increase in responsibility, and a sudden sensation of a decrease of knowledge. This can be devastating for people who are used to being in charge, who perceive themselves as competent and productive and powerful. Therefore, the first time I meet a new class we speak first of goals, and I am able to tell them, "I know you are all leaders and trained officers and used to being in charge, used to being listened to, used to impacting any situation. Therefore, one goal I have for this class is to provide you with a place to practice being as powerful in English as you are at home." This statement is invariably met with an audible murmur, slow nods, and a perceptible shifting as backs get straighter. I would like to suggest then, at this point, that successful intercultural communication is largely about perception: perception of the self, of a new environment, and of the new self in a new environment.

Before I begin with the actual exercises, I would like to list eight practical techniques I give my students to get started:

1. PRACTICE: practice being comfortable; practice using everything you've got; practice new ways to express yourself.
2. NETWORK: with other internationals and with Americans for survival, for another point of view, for relief, to ease adjustment and to promote your country and yourself.

3. USE POSITIVE LANGUAGE: I am learning English vs. I don't speak English/I don't speak much English/My English is very bad, etc.; remember that not speaking the language fluently is NOT a crime.

4. ENGAGE your listeners/those around you: you are not here to be invisible: let yourself ask for help; ask questions you know the answers to, for practice; repeat the answer to someone else as a question; discover the topic as soon as possible and confirm it by making some contribution regarding it; control the topic as often as possible by initiating conversations or small talk wherever you go.

5. KNOW AND USE SOME LANGUAGE LEARNING STRATEGIES: there is no time for hoping some useful language will happen to you; know or develop your own learning style; be observant and imitate what others do; know how to ask clarifying questions, repeat information just heard, when appropriate.

6. BE YOURSELF AND MORE: use your foreignness to engage people around you; don't try to blend into the woodwork--show the interest and effort you are making; don't be afraid to impact any situation: you are happening to it, it is not happening to you; use this opportunity to explore your potential: it is difficult to predict now what you will be able

to do in this new environment; enjoy yourself--there is a kind of freedom being away from your own culture.

7. KNOW YOURSELF: what are the ingredients of your success at home? Consider: power base; ability to express yourself; established support system; doing what you are good at; culture-specific evidence of success (may not transfer); knowing how to attract and get what you need: how can those translate, or what can you do to ensure success in the new environment? What is your mindset about your new environment and how you are going to fit?

8. HUMOR, usually the last conquerable frontier; use your own brand.

I would like to present some sample exercises, beginning with perception. I always begin with perception: talking about perception, defining it, giving examples of it. A student from Spain described perception as being something between feeling and understanding. I may tell them my story about receiving valentine heart stickers once in the mail long after February, off in an African village where I was the first English teacher. I used the stickers on my student's papers to show good work. They were extremely pleased and I could hear them all murmuring in African, "Oh, look! I got a tomato on my paper!" Seeing things differently can be

promoted as an advantage to students and provide support for them as they straddle two cultures. We do the "Sensory Dominance Experience" in which A gives B a word spontaneously, B reacts to it, A gives another, and so on, for ten words. At each word, which A is writing down, B tells whether his response was Visual, Kinesthetic, or Auditory. This works very well, because A's tend to jump to conclusions before B's response. The response "coffee", for example, like many words, could be V, K, or A. Only B knows what he experienced as the word came to mind--possibly seeing a cup of coffee, smelling it, or hearing it being made or sipped. Afterwards, it is easy to talk about jumping to conclusions about what the other person intended, the difficulty of waiting for the other person to respond or express himself, and letting the other person 'have' his own experience and point of view; all legitimate issues in any kind of communication, but complicated when the people are from different cultures. I usually repeat this exercise later in the quarter or training period, with a variation: A gives the first word, B responds, A responds to B's word, and so on. I repeat the exercise to show the students how the level of their language use has improved--they generally have access to many more words, the topics they choose are not restricted to the here and now of the first time, and they tend to use 'deeper', more sophisticated words reflecting concepts. Other perception exercises include drawing

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upside down, and drawing something only your partner can see and describes to you.

This Draw and Describe exercise is always well received. I use intriguing drawings which can be described in every day terms--'like a bowl', 'a long stick', but no one can say what it is, exactly. Thus, both partners are engaged throughout the exercise and at the end, they discuss the experience together, compare the drawing with the original, have a good laugh, and try to decide its purpose. At this point, they switch roles with a new drawing. Draw and Describe builds trust for both partners, forces them to use their own available words, knowledge, and communication techniques, provides a practice for risk taking, and demonstrates visually the effect of how what you say gets interpreted, something which is difficult to track if only verbals are involved.

Culturgrams serve as the basis of information as one student from each language group sets up an 'embassy' to receive visitors from other countries. They discuss the basics: language, greetings and other basic social rituals, food, politics, money systems, etc. and usually have no problem finding interesting things to talk about. How the exercise proceeds depends on the total group size and number of countries represented, but normally there is one country expert for each language, and the rest circulate. During this time, only the experts have a handout on their country, which provides a

basic map and statistics, and some headings to get them started; the exercise is to encourage conversation and not reading. At the end, there are enough handouts for everyone to keep for reference. This exercise helps the group become cohesive and everyone gets a chance to promote his own culture and make comparisons. In those discussions, comparisons with their observations and knowledge of American culture can also be heard.

What might follow naturally then, would be a discussion of cultural values, and the fact that they are not necessarily universal. While most people know this intellectually, perhaps few have had to actually experience it. For this format, I use "Alligator River", a well-known and often-used example of a dilemma. First, we brainstorm reprehensible actions of man against man, and demonstrate ranking. Then the students read the selection, and discuss any vocabulary which inhibits comprehension of the story. This is done by the group at large offering what they believe the word means based on the context in front of them. Next, each student ranks the characters for himself. For the group ranking, it is very important to mix the language groups, to offer diverse points of view. While some engineers may try to arrive at the group ranking mathematically, the real purpose is to provide a forum to discuss why you see so-and-so as the most or least reprehensible. In one very small group, the officers worked in pairs and the Korea-

Spain pair was totally opposite in their individual rankings and spent the entire time negotiating without coming to an agreement, which gave the group a realistic situation to discuss. In the second hour of this exercise, students of the same language group work together--singles can join any group they want. Each group writes a two or three-paragraph story using five characters which depicts what would be a values dilemma in their culture. At this point, several things can happen. If time permits, my first choice is to collect the barebones stories and type them up for the next day, so that the whole group can rank the new stories. Alternatively, each group can present their story briefly--with one telling, one writing the characters on the board, and all the other students vote verbally. This version is very lively, and there is a lot of practicing going on, without stress.

As time goes on, the group gets to know each other very well. Many come from group-oriented societies and are uncomfortable with the American way of every guy for himself. I encourage them to start study groups in each class, reminding them that they are also contributing, because they do not want to be seen as a drain on others. The Chinese, for example, have an excellent background in math and are a big help to Americans who have been away from school for a long time. Once they are convinced that they do have impact, they become more comfortable. And while I never use the

words 'self-esteem', the promotion of higher self-esteem issue is embedded in every activity. The next activity provides four or five hours of group intensive work where confidence can be practiced and enjoyed.

In a military setting, and perhaps it is also a large part of American society, the use of acronyms is very common. It is not cool, I tell them, to say 'Pacific Gas & Electric'--you must say "PG&E" so people can understand you. The ACRONYM exercise lets them set up an organization or business with an acronym for a name. They do this in small groups, and I advise them the first day that it will be an organization they have to live with for a week, and to give it depth. Once established, and the logo designed, they must then promote it to the other organizations in the class and see who they can do business with and who they cannot. This becomes interesting, especially when defense groups and health groups meet. This exercise is also well-received for the freedom to move about, talking over ideas, using what they already know.

The Oral Presentation is the last exercise I want to mention--it comes at the end of the quarter. The presentation itself is only three to five minutes and must deal with communications or a military topic. The reason for this is so that the students are in their professional mode when they are doing it; many are used to giving briefs on the job. As preparation, students write out on a

piece of paper this sentence: "My greatest fear about giving an oral presentation in English is _____." Be sure they understand it is not topic you are after--one student said 'giving a recipe, because I don't cook'. Then each one reads or says it out loud while somebody lists them on the board. Because they are among friends by now, no one ever seems uncomfortable doing this. The list, of course, reveals similar fears. At that point solutions are discussed, and the advice to practice always appears. Immediately a new task is given: now complete this--"I am like _____ because _____." (Must give supporting details.) Give them adequate time to think about it before they go before the group to recite or read it out. This is usually hilarious but also taken very seriously by the students. Their responses range from a haiku to a simple statement, and are telling. Getting up in front gives them a chance to see the room as they will see it during their presentation--they've seen it before, more than likely, but not so formally as they will. The presentations themselves are interesting and successful because each officer is speaking on a familiar topic, he knows his audience, and he is using everything he's got to get his point across. There is interaction with the audience, and I have seen officers melt and visibly relax into a seemingly familiar task of speaking before a group of other officers. In that moment it would appear that they have met one of

the goals of the class as they rise to the occasion and show their power in English.

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that while knowing the basics of a language is critical whenever you are moving in and out of other cultures, it is possible to be an effective communicator with only five words, as long as you use those five words and not wait for the sixth one to happen. By knowing yourself, and projecting yourself as a success, you will be able to attract the input you need to help you succeed at your given task, whether it be business or pleasure.

For Further Reading:

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Specific handouts are available upon request from the author of Successful and Practical Intercultural Communications Techniques.